



WATT'S' CHRISTMAS DIFFICULTY.

BY ELAINE CARTWRIGHT.

Lilla Sprague seemed to blow in at the door with a gust of wind and a drift of snow, and, as the door was hastily shut behind her in the teeth of these unwelcome companions, she asked the servant girl, "Where's mamma?"

"Up stairs, writing, I believe, Miss Lilla."

Then, having kicked a pair of snow-encrusted overshoes into a corner of the hall, Miss Lilla ran upstairs in a hurry, while the servant girl stared after her. "See here, mother," said Lilla, whirling into her mother's room.

"Up stairs, writing, I believe, Miss Lilla."

"What, dear?" Mrs. Sprague asked, looking up absently from a letter she was writing.

"It's all over—I say, it's all over between Randolph—Oh, what a fool I've been!" And she flung herself, sobbing, on a big horsehair sofa.

"But why, Lilla?"

"Don't ask me like that, mother. Don't! I've told you before. And this—is the sec—sec—second time. Oh!"

"I don't understand you, daughter," said her mother, leaving her batch of Christmas correspondence and going to carry comfort to the tragic figure on the horsehair sofa.

"He's done it again!" Lilla moaned.

"But done what, dear?"

"The same as he did before."

"What did he do before?"

"Mother, told you day before yesterday to run away from me. He thought I didn't see him."

"Mr. Watts ran away from you?"

"Yes, mother, and I'll never speak to him again. Day before yesterday he at least had the politeness to bow. This time he just turned and went down a side street. He was with that rump of a cousin. I just left her, and him, and the whole lot."

"Now, my dear Lilla," said Mrs. Sprague, "you are making yourself unreasonably violent. Mr. Watts certainly never meant to run away from you like—"

"Then I suppose his legs just carried him, mama. He couldn't help himself, like the man with the cork leg in the song."

"Don't be foolish, child. Mr. Watts will be here to explain it all. You'll see."

In truth to this Lilla only rose from the sofa, grimly took off her wraps and hat, muttering, "Yes, I'll see," and disappeared through a door which led to her own room.

Mrs. Sprague did not follow her daughter with any further attempts at consolation, neither did she guess what Lilla was going to do, and that was, to write a note.

"Dear Sir,—In case you may wish to make any explanation of your very strange conduct on two occasions this week, I wish you to spare yourself the trouble of doing any such thing, either personally or in writing. I refuse to receive you or your letters. Your ring shall be returned by mail, registered."

"LILLA SPRAGUE."

Then she folded and sealed the note, and ran downstairs with it, and told the servant girl to call in the boy who made himself generally useful about the back premises. And the generally useful boy was given the note to carry to Mr. Watts, without delay, which he did, ne-

lecting a number of important duties in connection with Lilla's mother's kitchen and Lilla's father's buggy.

Lilla then went back to her own room and wept bitterly and vehemently for half an hour, after which she fell asleep. But the little note.

Well, it is not to the purpose to tell upon the terrible effect which this little note written by a girl produced. It may be compared to one of those much polished little projectiles which modern science forms for killing, and which can work more havoc than a dozen of the rough, dull, old-fashioned slugs of past generations.

That little projectile which Lilla fired at her fiance by means of the generally useful boy very nearly ended the life of Randolph Watts; at least, so Watts said. He could not think, or he might have known, into which he had got himself. His transmission stared him in the face. He had run away from Lilla—twice—and had even conustralated himself on its escape from her and chucked over it secretly. How was he to convince her that his evasion was not an evidence of disloyalty to her?

It was only three days before Christmas, and Watts had promised himself a brighter future. Christmas might have been stored for him, that Christmas should be the happiest he had known so far at least.

As a rule he was not a resourceless man in emergencies by any means, but this time he thought of everything except the one way out of his difficulty. He could have easily found a friend to go as ambassador to his incensed lady-love and explain his "very strange conduct on two occasions," but he only sat with his head between his hands staring at Lilla's decisive words. "I refuse to receive you or your letters. You'll see."

"Very well," said Watts, with almost childlike resignation.

"And then the miniature can go inside with the original crystal over it, eh?"

"Very well."

First to Higgins. Mrs. Sucher went where she took possession of a remarkable present—a gold bracelet, a tiny old-fashioned watch and the miniature. Then to Moore's, where she left the bracelet, the watch and the miniature. Then to Mrs. Sprague.

As Mrs. Sucher entered Mrs. Sprague's private and individual sitting-room she heard a whisk and rustle of skirts and a door closed behind a rapidly retreating figure.

"Lilla, not well?" said Mrs. Sucher, with an incredulous laugh. "Too bad. These Christmas preparations are undoubtedly tiring. Higgins has spent three weeks, my dear, Mrs. Sprague, running about town in search of the right presents for the right people."

"You must have laid yourself out to be generous," said Mrs. Sprague.

"I am generous. My generosity is wearing me to a frazzle. I give my time and labor to help other people give presents. That brings me to the object of this visit, as they say in old-fashioned novels. Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Sprague, "and I am burning with curiosity. So make haste and tell me."

"Or do you know?"

"You were with Randolph Watts when he ran away from Lilla yesterday. How was it?"

"You promise not to tell her?—to keep it for three days? Very well. You see, he wants to give her a bracelet he had made for her, with a very pretty motto on it in enamel. Then he wants to give her a beautiful little watch that belonged to his poor dear mother, and he has had a little miniature of his mother made to fit behind the watch. First he took this watch to Moore's and wanted them to fit it behind the bracelet. Then he took the bracelet with a scrap of paper in which, in his mother's writing, were the words, 'Press the spring and look inside, behind the watch.' And when she looked a lovely smiling face looked back at her face that was very like Randolph Watts's own."

And at the bottom of the stocking—away at the very toe was another paper which said, "The bracelet ought to tell you why I ran away."

"Wal, a moment. They told him at Moore's that the thing couldn't be done that way because the crystal of the watch was too thick, so he took it from Lilla to Higgins'. That was the day he ran up against Lilla at the door of Higgins', when he had the whole package in his hand, and was afraid she would ask him, and ran. Yesterday, just as he

was taking me to Higgins' to hold a consultation on that wonderful bracelet we saw Lilla coming along. I said to him, 'Randolph, if she meets us she'll want to walk along with us, and then the whole plot is ruined. Let's turn down here before she sees us.' But it seems she saw us after all."

On Christmas morning, in spite of many earnest assurances from her mother that this was the best way to bring a charm into all her trouble, Lilla was terribly cross and out of sorts with all the chimes as she had been for four days past. Moreover she awoke with a headache.

She found a stocking tied to the head of her bed, as she had expected, and took the stocking down and opened it mechanically. Then she found the bracelet with a scrap of paper in which, in her mother's writing, were the words,

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